

THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE  
WAR ON POVERTY

HON. JOHN CONYERS, JR.

OF MICHIGAN

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, January 8, 2014

Mr. CONYERS. Mr. Speaker, a half-century ago today, President Johnson stood before Congress and declared “unconditional war on poverty.” Since that declaration we have seen many victories, but also many defeats. Battles may have been won, but the war is far from over.

President Johnson’s first State of the Union committed his administration to the pursuit of his fallen predecessor’s agenda. Not out of sorrow for President Kennedy, but out of conviction for the principles he represented.

President Johnson defined the mission of the War on Poverty as helping Americans achieve the American dream. He spoke in terms of the average citizen and his “hopes for a fair chance to make good; his hopes for fair play from the law; his hopes for a full-time job on full-time pay; his hopes for a decent home for his family in a decent community; his hopes for a good school for his children with good teachers; and his hopes for security when faced with sickness or unemployment or old age.

He identified poverty as not the cause but the symptom of America’s problems. He believed the cause lay in a lack of education and training, a lack of proper clothing and housing, a lack of safe communities and the sense of security needed to pursue a better life.

He challenged the nation to pursue bold solutions. He called for expanded investment to rescue distressed communities; to engage aimless youth in productive purposes; and to ensure basic levels of food, income, and medical security.

We have done much in the intervening years to achieve his vision. Today, we have the Affordable Care Act helping Americans to receive vital medical services that were previously out of reach. We have numerous programs helping communities offer their children more opportunities to succeed. We have rooted out the most abject forms of poverty that once prevailed throughout much of our rural communities. The poverty faced by our nation’s seniors prior to Johnson’s declaration has seen tremendous improvement because of his call to action. And we have expanded workforce training programs and educational opportunities for everyone, sending millions of Americans to college who are the first in their families to attend.

Unfortunately these admirable gains reflect less urgency and dedication than the War on Poverty should merit. The gains in the first decade after President Johnson announced this endeavor were remarkable, with the official poverty level hitting its all-time low in 1973. But since then new economic challenges have arisen that work against those at the bottom, limiting the ability of the impoverished to raise their position.

Today, we have an inflation-adjusted minimum wage that is less than 70% of what it was at the end of President Johnson’s administration. We have vast inequities in our

schools that make the quality of children’s education first and foremost a function of address and not their own effort or merit. These inequalities are magnified in an era of skyrocketing executive pay, corporate profitability, and worker productivity, where workers must subsist on stagnant wages that cannot even keep up with historically modest inflation. Just a couple of weeks ago, we made the problem worse by cutting off unemployment assistance to 1.3 million long-term job seeking Americans in a job market that simply cannot offer them meaningful employment.

I urge my colleagues to cease their assault on the objectives President Johnson declared so long ago. Quit fighting the healthcare law and help us improve, refine, and implement it for the good of all Americans. Quit denigrating people who worked for decades, but through no fault of their own are now facing extended unemployment. They aren’t resting on a hammock; they are clinging to anything that floats in an economic storm that we helped Wall Street create. Quit bargaining away the social safety net that prevents a family confronted with an unexpected layoff or family illness from losing their home and their future.

But those actions are merely the very least of what we should be doing. If we want to make sure that every person actually has a chance to pursue happiness—which as President Johnson pointed out is the reason that we so jealously guard our security and liberty—then we need to finally win this war. It is time for us to recognize that in the wealthiest nation in the world and in the history of the world, we simply cannot tolerate the sort of persistent poverty that prevents generations of citizens from providing for themselves and their families.

Winning this prosperity will require us to take action just as our predecessors did when President Johnson first called upon them. We can begin by taking up my bill, H.R. 1000, which would aggressively pursue a program of job training, and infrastructure and community investment until we reach full-employment. We should also pass a bill to raise the minimum wage and index it to inflation for this generation of workers—the most productive of any generation in history—so they can realize the same fair break their parents and grandparents had. And we must reauthorize extended unemployment insurance to help salvage the dignity and security of men and women who lost their jobs because of the Wall Street bankers we bailed out in 2008.

These are the first steps to ensuring that every American is able to enjoy the fruits of our forebears and our own toil. They are not enough to solve the breadth of problems that we face, but their enactment would lead to a meaningful improvement in the lives of those who are beginning to lose faith in us and themselves.

I urge my colleagues to take action this session of Congress that reflects the standards President Johnson laid out a half-century ago and to pursue an agenda that elevates the poor rather than entrenches the rich. We did it before, we can do it again.

SENATE COMMITTEE MEETINGS

Title IV of Senate Resolution 4, agreed to by the Senate of February 4,

1977, calls for establishment of a system for a computerized schedule of all meetings and hearings of Senate committees, subcommittees, joint committees, and committees of conference. This title requires all such committees to notify the Office of the Senate Daily Digest—designated by the Rules Committee—of the time, place and purpose of the meetings, when scheduled and any cancellations or changes in the meetings as they occur.

As an additional procedure along with the computerization of this information, the Office of the Senate Daily Digest will prepare this information for printing in the Extensions of Remarks section of the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD on Monday and Wednesday of each week.

Meetings scheduled for Thursday, January 9, 2014 may be found in the Daily Digest of today’s record.

MEETINGS SCHEDULED

JANUARY 10

9:30 a.m.

Joint Economic Committee

To hold hearings to examine the employment situation for December 2013.

SD-G50

JANUARY 14

10:15 a.m.

Committee on Armed Services

Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities

To receive a closed briefing on Department of Defense counterterrorism operations.

SVC-217

10:30 a.m.

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

To hold hearings to examine conference and travel spending across the Federal government.

SD-342

2:15 p.m.

Special Committee on Aging

To hold hearings to examine aging in comfort, focusing on assessing the special needs of America’s Holocaust survivors.

SD-562

2:30 p.m.

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Subcommittee on Financial and Contracting Oversight

To hold hearings to examine management of air traffic controller training tactics.

SD-342

Committee on the Judiciary

To hold hearings to examine the report of the President’s Review Group on Intelligence and Communications Technologies.

SD-226

Select Committee on Intelligence

To hold closed hearings to examine certain intelligence matters.

SH-219

JANUARY 15

10 a.m.

Committee on Finance

To hold hearings to examine certain nominations.

SD-215

2 p.m.

Committee on Banking, Housing, and  
Urban Affairs

Subcommittee on Financial Institutions  
and Consumer Protection

To hold hearings to examine regulating  
financial holding companies and phys-  
ical commodities.

SD-538

2:30 p.m.

Committee on Commerce, Science, and  
Transportation

To hold hearings to examine the future  
of unmanned aviation in the United  
States economy, focusing on safety and  
privacy considerations.

SR-253

JANUARY 16

9:30 a.m.

Committee on Armed Services

To hold hearings to examine the nomina-  
tions of Madelyn R. Creedon, of Indi-  
ana, to be Principal Deputy Adminis-  
trator, National Nuclear Security Ad-  
ministration, Department of Energy,  
and Brad R. Carson, to be Under Sec-  
retary of the Army, and William A.  
LaPlante, Jr., to be Assistant Sec-  
retary of the Air Force for Acquisition,  
both of the Department of Defense.

SD-G50

10 a.m.

Joint Economic Committee

To hold hearings to examine income in-  
equality in the United States.

SH-216

2:30 p.m.

Committee on Foreign Relations

To hold hearings to examine the nomina-  
tions of Robert C. Barber, of Massachu-  
setts, to be Ambassador to the Repub-  
lic of Iceland, George James Tsunis, of  
New York, to be Ambassador to the  
Kingdom of Norway, and Colleen Brad-  
ley Bell, of California, to be Amba-  
sador to Hungary, all of the Depart-  
ment of State.

SD-419

Select Committee on Intelligence

To hold closed hearings to examine cer-  
tain intelligence matters.

SH-219